

James CORKE-WEBSTER

Eusebius and Empire. Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, 345 pp.

Lecturer in Roman History at King's College from London, James Corke-Webster has already published several books and articles dedicated to the late Antiquity and its cultural, social or religious legacy. He investigated there the way how Christianity evolved from a forbidden religion to one of the most important for that time, and showed how it changed the face of the Empire and the way of thinking of its rulers. Now, in his latest book, he presents the life, work and thought of the man who can be considered one of the fathers of the ecclesiastical history, namely Eusebius from Caesarea.

His approach is not only an intellectual journey that makes the author read the works of the aforementioned bishop or the historiography dedicated to him, but also a real one, as he shows in the «Preface» (pp. IX-XI):

«Trying to understand the *History* has taken me from the Danube at the north of Rome's Empire, to its place of production, Eusebius' home town of Caesarea Maritima, in the biblical lands at the Empire's east, where I wrote the Conclusion to this book. My intellectual journey in that time has in some ways been the reverse – from undergraduate study in Theology to a Lectureship in Roman History. This book reflects those evolving interests and was born of a changing understanding of early Christianity and its place in Graeco-Roman context as well as in a modern academic study» (p. IX).

Linked with authors' destiny, the book, segmented into three parts and accompanied by a rich bibliographical list (pp. 302-

339) and an general index (pp. 340-345) according to the contemporary exigencies of scientific research, not only does it present the life of the famous writer, but also investigates each one of his works underlining its value and the aspects of actuality that can be found there.

After presenting the way how Eusebius' ideas were perceived during the history by different authors and a critical analysis of the historiography, starting with authors like Edward Gibon, passing by scholars like Robert Grant and Timothy Barnes (p. 1-12) and until today, he begins with the presentation of the relationship between the biography of the writer and his masterpiece, namely *The Ecclesiastical History* (pp. 13-88). Conceived as a review of literature where the author presents the way how different theologians have used his works and read them through the lengths of the effects that they had on the posthumous image of Constantine the Great, the introductory part also contains the motivation of the author. He underlines there that:

«My aims in writing this book have been threefold. First, I believe that Eusebius deserves a place in the canon of exciting and innovative authors to whom all students of the classical world should be introduced, and the *History* deserves a reputation as one of the most surprising, entertaining and impressively constructed writings of classical antiquity. Second, as the watershed work that straddled the transitional period that saw early Christianity and the world in which it was embedded mutually transform, Eusebius' *History* provided the

model not only for the narrative histories of Christianity that followed but also for Christianity itself. And finally, it is only, I believe, by understanding Eusebius' own aims, techniques, and debts in this project of narrating Christian history that we can properly begin to tease out the realities of Christian experience that lie hidden behind it» (p. 9).

Reading the text in the context of the age when it was written and taking into account the cultural elements that define its style and content, it seems to be the key that helps the author to accomplish all the three aims proposed in the introduction. Therefore, inside the first part (pp. 13-88), segmented in two chapters, one dedicated to the landmarks of the biography of Eusebius (pp. 13-53), while the other one to his *History* (pp. 54-88), he not only analyses philological and philosophical aspects of the work, but also speaks about the age and the relationship between the bishop, the community of bishops and faithful, and the emperor, re-evaluating the conclusions of the previous research. Then, the second part (pp. 89-214) is dedicated to four important categories of Christians from the elite of the Empire, namely the intellectuals (pp. 89-120), the ascetics (pp. 121-148), families (pp. 149-174) and martyrs (pp. 175-213) where James Corke-Webster speaks about their influence, upon the contemporary world and the way how all these categories contributed to the Christianization of the Empire. He also shows how the influence of these categories were perceived by the Byzantine scholars in the process of social Christianization. The last part is a kind of «historical ecclesiology» (pp. 215-279). The writer presents there Eusebius' vision about the Church and the relevance of the city of Rome in its understanding.

The last element will be also a debated one in the conclusion of the work (pp. 280-301) where he speaks about the optimistic vision promoted by the historian and its relevance showing that:

«Eusebius left his readers with the tantalising proposition that this new paradise was not a temporary state of affairs but an ongoing promise for the future of now Christians occupied the imperial seat. In this final tableau, the citizens of the Empire celebrate not just current blessings but the hope of those still to come. The basis of that hope at the end of Eusebius' picture of Constantine is the same principle that introduced it – the viability of a stable and virtuous Christian dynasty» (p. 300).

Filled with a rich historical content, analysing the achievements of previous scholarship on the topic and refusing to be only a synthesis of literature, the book of James Corke-Webster entitled: *Eusebius and Empire. Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History*, is not only an interesting historical approach that brings into attention Eusebius of Caesarea and his role in defining the Christian empire, but also speaks about his understanding of the local context where he was living in or the role of Rome in understanding and predicting the future of Christianity. Linked with the destiny of his author, this book is an important contribution to the investigation of Church history and it will be for sure useful not only for the Christian thinkers, but also for historians and for all the readers who want to find more about the way how Christianity changed the world.

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